



Brownfield Banquet aims to challenge fears around brownfield sites, which see them as empty spaces, of potential threat and danger.

We aim to reframe these spaces, and see them as resilient eco-systems, which can, with little or no intervention, become sites of potential - we have a lot to learn from these environments.

They can be safe, what's more - they can be special. Our activity on these sites calls for recognition of what they are (and what they could be) today, not just what they were, or what they might be in the future.

#brownfieldbanquet #monthlymatics

photographs : Anna Francis and Glen Stoker

# BROWNFIELD BANQUET

A collaboration between Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies, featuring a commission of new work by Andrew Branscombe. A Monthly Matics event in partnership with AirSpace Gallery.

MATIC

airspacegallery

ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND  
LOTTERY FUNDED

Supported using public funding by  
ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND



## Occupying The Brownfield : A proposition by Anna Francis

It has been proven that spending time in green spaces, however small, can improve the health and wellbeing of city dwellers. In some major cities, mature Brownfield sites have come to be recognised for the important contribution they can make to a rich and diverse ecology, for both humans and animals, as set out by Professor Peter Crane, Director of The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (2002);

‘These brownfield sites have become crucially important places for people and wildlife, reconnecting urban communities with nature.’ (1)

Many of these sites, far from being regarded as eyesores, and problem spaces can be reframed in relation to the diversity of inhabitant, both animal and insect to be found there, but in addition, unlike many highly manicured greenfield sites, can sustain a rich variety of plant life, due to their specific situations and features. In many cases the plants to be found on the Brownfield can be seen to be highly adaptable, resourceful and opportunistic, and yet, in a lot of cities the role of these sites in the development of healthy city ecologies is undervalued.

To rethink the Brownfield; they could be regarded as an important interim nature haven for wildlife, and with little or no intervention, could be transformed in our minds, into important and useful temporary sites for nature. In post-industrial cities, these sites can at times be maturing for many years – becoming established with a diverse range of both flora and fauna. It is time that developers and landowners recognised that these sites have served as important habitat for animals, and perhaps build some space for wildlife into their development plans in recognition of this.

The work in Stoke-on-Trent on these sites between 2012 and 2016 looked to 3 very different Brownfield sites within a mile of each other. It was fascinating to see the unchecked growth across the sites over the 3 years, but also to witness the diversity of plant types.

Site 1: Greyhound Track, Slippery Lane. The Greyhound Track closed in 1963. A mature and diverse collection of both edibles (strawberries, blackberries) and various succulent alpine and sedums can be found on the site.

Site 2: ABC Cinema, Broad St. The Cinema was demolished in 2008, and quickly the site has become populated by buddleia, beech and various medicinal plants like plantain, woad and willowherb.

Site 3: Abbatoir, Potteries Way. Possibly the most abundant of the 3 sites, the abbatoir very quickly established a thriving range of flowers, from the common red clover and bugle, through to more respectable garden flowers like aquilegia. The Abbatoir had been demolished just a year before the first visit in 2012, but the presence of dragonflies and the health of the plants led to speculation as to what had contributed to such rich soil; could it have been blood and bone from the abbatoir, or the presence of standing water on the site?

These spaces exist outside the usual constraints of societal control, and interestingly can often be located right in the middle of inner city areas, next to development. Temporarily at least they stand as a space outside the usual planning rules. The activity and growth on these sites is not sanctioned, but triumphant, resourceful and defiantly successful.

In thinking about these sites in relation to artist led projects in cities, a correlation can be drawn between the spaces and the plants occupying Brownfields, and the way that artists recognise and occupy sites in the city which may be overlooked or undervalued. It is interesting to consider the notion of the Creative Brownfield which refers to artists occupying post-industrial space, often in ad-hoc and temporary ways. It may show resourcefulness and an alternative, grassroots approach to development, but the question should be raised over who is benefitting long term. Just as the plants and animals of the Brownfield occupy these sites in the interim between demolition and redevelopment, the place for artists in the creative brownfield is equally precarious.

“...urban development in these cities appears to be bounded by highly policed ownership regimes that prevent the seeds of unincorporated, non-profit and low-profit artistic activities from growing too far beyond their sanctioned role as transient ‘cleaners’ of derelict brownfields.” (2)

Andres and Golubchiko, I, (2016).

If recognition can be given to the role and value of brownfield flora and fauna on diverse city ecologies, through a commitment to making space for them within development plans, can we also consider the value of the (often unpaid) work done by artists to develop the places they occupy; and in recognising this value, can we find a way to create permanent space for artist led activity within the developing city? Further, can this be done in a way which does not exploit the sweat equity of the artist, but rather sees the work done as an investment in their own future, as well as the future of the places they are working within?

1. Chipchase A and Frith M (2002) BROWNFIELD? GREENFIELD? The threat to London's Unofficial Countryside. A report by London Wildlife Trust on behalf of the London Brownfields Forum. LONDON WILDLIFE TRUST. Available at: <http://www.bexleywildlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Brownfield-Greenfield-the-threat-to-Londons-unofficial-countryside.pdf> [Accessed 21 March 2017]

2. The notion of the Creative Brownfield is set out by Andres and Golubchiko, I, (2016) in THE LIMITS TO ARTIST-LED REGENERATION: Creative Brownfields in the Cities of High Culture. INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF URBAN AND REGIONAL RESEARCH, [Online]. 40/4, 757-775. Available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-2427.12412/pdf> [Accessed 21 March 2017].

